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AUTHOR	Porter, Rosalie Pedalino
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ABSTRACT

The history of bilingual education in Massachusetts since its first bilingual education law in 1971 is examined and compared to the experience of California, which is offered as an example of how bilingual education policy and practice may evolve in other states. It is suggested that Massachusetts has paralleled the California experience in failing to collect student performance data over the last two decades, to demonstrate good or bad results of transitional bilingual education programs. The reading test administered to third-graders across Massachusetts in 1997 and 1998 is proposed as an example of this resistance to accountability. Increased flexibility in local program choice and participation of English language learners in the assessment process is recommended for Massachusetts. (MSE)

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•The Future of Bilingual Education in Massachusetts:• Lessons from California

by Rosalie Pedalino Porter

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Winter 1998.

The thirty-year experiment called "bilingual education," teaching children in their primary language while they are learning English, is seriously challenged across the country. Educators are divided into two major and seemingly irreconcilable factions: traditional supporters of the status quo, i.e., bilingual schooling for limited-English proficient children (essentially for Spanish speakers); and the innovators calling for early immersion programs in English. The crucial decision on which path to follow will determine the future quality of schooling for the 45,000 English language learners in Massachusetts public schools.

Following the first national Bilingual Education Act (1968), Transitional Bilingual Education (Chapter 71-A) was enacted by the Massachusetts legislature in 1971 and similar laws were soon passed in a dozen other states. The 1970s and '80s saw the establishment of bilingual programs, the settlement of several court cases in favor of native language instruction, and the publication of the first studies on the effectiveness of this teaching strategy. Disappointing results of bilingual programs prompted a search for viable alternatives that began in the 1980s and grew more widespread in this decade. In practical terms, bilingual programs have not consistently demonstrated their superiority to other teaching approaches for improving the English language learning and academic achievement of limited-English students.

California, with 1.4 million immigrant and native-born limited-English students, serves as an example of how the bilingual education drama may play out in other states. In 1976 California first mandated native language instruction programs. By 1978 the legislature allowed the bilingual education law to expire. Nevertheless, the State Department of Education continued to impose the bilingual requirement on all school districts with limited-English students, allowing only a few districts to provide "alternative" English immersion teaching.

Not until 1992 did California publish any evaluation of the outcomes of bilingual schooling and this

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first report, Meeting the Challenge of Language Diversity, found no evidence for the benefits of native language instruction. The report concluded that "California public schools do not have valid and ongoing assessments of performance for students with limited proficiency in English. Therefore, the state and public cannot hold schools accountable for LEP students achieving high levels of performance" (author's emphasis). This is an astounding statement¾if the schools are not responsible for demonstrating student progress, then who is?

For ten years the California legislature attempted to enact a law to reinforce the right to program choice and the requirement for accountability of LEP student progress. Bilingual advocates and ethnic advocacy groups routinely opposed and defeated these bills. During this period, any school district trying to initiate an English language program faced strong obstructionist tactics by the State Department of Education. The few that persisted¾Westminster, Magnolia, Savanna, Orange¾were forced to go to court to win a right that was already theirs under existing state and federal law.

The "English for the Children" campaign that won 61% of the vote on June 2nd and now requires English immersion instruction grew out of a dozen years of frustration with unacceptably high dropout rates for Latino students, little evidence of academic success for English language instruction, and the inability of the legislature or the state education bureaucracy to open the school doors to innovation and improvement.

Massachusetts has paralleled the California experience in failing to collect student performance data over the past 27 years to demonstrate good or bad results of TBE programs. Every effort to change the TBE law to allow local school districts a choice of programs and to add strong accountability has been rebuffed. Even now, with the state's massive investment in education reform since 1993, one hardly dares open a public discussion of the urgent need for improving the schooling of limited-English students.

One example of resistance to accountability is the reading test administered to 3rd graders across the state in April 1997 and 1998. In 1997 there were 3,254 3rd grade students who had started school as English language learners. Of the 3rd grade student population at large, 99% took the reading test; of the students classified as "Special Education," 92% took the test; of the LEP students only 58% were tested. Lest one imagine that there was honest misunderstanding in the first year this test was administered, the 1998 participation rates are even more appalling. In 1998, the number of 3rd graders who started school in the LEP category had increased to 4,582. While 98% of SPED students took the reading test, only 42% of the LEP students participated. When I investigated further, I discovered that 3,259 (71%) of this year's LEP 3rd graders had been in Massachusetts public schools since 1st grade or earlier.

How can we account for such a high percentage of students left out of a state test that is officially described thus? "Virtually all 3rd grade students are expected to participate in the testing program, since full participation is necessary to measure the achievement of all students in order to serve them effectively." There is a loophole in the wording of the state testing guidelines that is being exploited to the extent that one district excused 97% of its students from the reading test. Without a base line measure of student performance in the most essential skill¾reading¾adequate measures cannot be taken to improve the schooling of these students.

Will Massachusetts be the last place in the country to retain its rigid, one-size-fits-all, bilingual program mandate? Without flexibility in local program choice and the participation of English language learners in the assessment process, the opportunities for intelligent changes and

improvements are stunted. The time for spirited public discussion s now, and the Education Reform initiative must finally take serious account of the needs of English language learners.